

Testimony of Christopher B. Bedford of Montague, Michigan – Tuesday, February 21, 2006

A year and a half ago I moved to Michigan from Iowa – in part to escape the growing disaster that surrounds the raising of animals in industrial facilities. In Iowa, I witnessed the tragedy that these animal factories brought to rural communities, to consumers, to the environment, and perhaps, worst of all, to family farmers. Animal factories are killing Iowa's future.

It makes me sad today to see Michigan going down this dead end road.

The industrial raising of animals – concentrating thousands of animals in confined facilities – using antibiotics, heavy metals like arsenic and copper, and hormones like rBST to promote growth and production – locking farmers into often abusive and confiscatory contracts – producing industrial amounts of waste that may be contaminated with drug resistant bacteria, heavy metals, and dangerous hormones – is a fundamentally and fatally flawed technology.

I am an organizer who works with both farmers and consumers, and I can tell you that every poll I have conducted or seen documents that consumers want animal products produced in ways that respect animal nature, that protect environmental quality, that enhance community quality of life, and that promote the welfare of independent family farmers.

When consumers know how animals are treated in these factories, they reject the animal factory products for humanely raised, ecologically sound alternatives -- witness the explosion in consumer demand for "free-range" eggs, "grass fed" meats and "organic" milk.

To continue to survive today, industrial animal production has to hide in order to avoid their customers' wrath. What kind of business depends on concealment of their fundamental values, lack of accurate labeling, and special government treatment to be successful?

These bills – House Bills 5711 through 5716 – weaken Michigan farmers because they remove the production realities of animal factories even further from the public interest and oversight. In turn, this further isolates farmers who engage in industrial animal production from their customers – making them more and more dependent on the one-sided contracts pushed by the corporate integrators.

I have seen this isolation and contract slavery turn once independent, proud family farmers into virtual serfs on their own land – forced to spend more and more of their own money to meet the demands of their corporate handlers and their unsustainable technologies.

These bills are a prima facie acknowledgement of the desperate situation these farmers cum factory operators face. House Bills 5711 through 5716 basically remove animal factory operators from environmental oversight, insulating them from complaints of their neighbors, and setting a standard of "knowingly and recklessly causing impairment of the natural resources of the state" for liability.

This standard, when applied to "acts of God" like unexpectedly heavy rains and high winds, is virtually meaningless – a kind of "Get Out of Jail" FREE Card – that will ultimately, and I fear, quickly backfire on the very farmers it is meant to protect.

In this time of tight budgets, we cannot spend our state's resources defending animal factory operators from the wrath of their neighbors and opposition of their customers.

If we truly want to help Michigan farmers survive beyond the next government bailout, we need to help them come into balance with nature including respecting animal nature. That's the future.

This legislation is a bad idea for Michigan's farmers and consumers.

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